

History of Fairbury's Two Oldest Parks

By: Dale C. Maley
For: FairburyNews.Net
Date: May 5, 2025

Fairbury currently has six different park areas. These include Sunken Park, Veteran's Memorial Park, Munz Nature Park, Livingston Square, Marsh Park, and North Park. Two of the three oldest park areas in Fairbury still exist, but one was eventually replaced by commercial buildings.

Fairbury's oldest park is Marsh Park. Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks through Central Illinois. John Marsh and his son Henry Marsh moved to Fairbury from Washington, Illinois, shortly after the city was founded. John and Henry Marsh created a new addition to Fairbury to build more new homes. As part of the Marsh Addition to Fairbury, they donated one city block to be developed into a park in 1859. In 1862, one mile west of Fairbury, the Marshs dug down 180 feet and found coal. This started a coal mining boom in Central Illinois, with Fairbury eventually having five coal mines.

John Marsh built his home at 200 North Jackson Street, at the southwest corner of Marsh Park. His house still stands today. John installed a fence around the park and planted trees in it. He used it as a cow pasture. He installed turn-styles to allow public access to the park. John Marsh died in 1885, and his son Henry died in 1886. They are both buried in the cemetery in Washington, Illinois.

In 1896, John Marsh's wife sued the Village of Fairbury. She contended the village never improved the land into a park, so ownership should return to her. On November 9, 1896, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled ownership of the property would remain with the Village of Fairbury. This lawsuit prompted our city fathers to start to develop the land into a city park. On June 26, 1903, a new bandstand was built. The Fairbury Band played in a one-hour concert. This bandstand was a unique design, with restrooms in the basement.

By 1928, Marsh Park had a bandstand, swings, teeter-totters, slides, a drinking fountain, a sand pile, tennis courts, and an outdoor oven. Fifty years after the 1903 bandstand was first built, it had decayed and needed renovation. It was converted into a restroom building. The basement was filled, and the restrooms were on the ground level. The original basement bathroom design was a bad idea because every time it rained, the restrooms flooded!

In 1957, the Lions Club built the three pavilions still standing today. Around the same time, new steel playground equipment was added to the park. The Blade reported that 7,485 people used Marsh Park that summer. Large family reunions held at Marsh Park were very popular in that era.

In 1996, David Surber and other volunteers added the large basketball court. By 2017, Marsh Park had decayed significantly. The Fairbury Improvement Group decided to take on the project of upgrading the whole park. The City of Fairbury provided over 1,100 feet of beautiful, curved new sidewalks. Prairie Lands Foundation provided the balance of the funding to renovate the park.

Before the 2017 renovation, Marsh Park had no centerpiece attraction. It was determined that a large twenty-two-foot diameter gazebo that allowed people to walk through it would be the new centerpiece of the park. The Marsh Park renovation also included refurbishing the 114-year-old restrooms, building a new bandstand, screening in the north pavilion, adding six new comfortable park benches, installing eight new LED sidewalk pole lights, consolidating all the playground equipment into one mulched wood area, and installing of security cameras. Over twenty-five different volunteers donated over 2,000 hours working on this seventeen-week-long project.

A celebration was held in 2018 for the completion of the project to refurbish Marsh Park. Pavilions at Marsh Park and North Park can be reserved by calling 815-674-3660.

In recent years, Fairbury has suffered from the ash bore tree disease, which resulted in eight ash trees having to be removed from Marsh Park. Through various community group donations and funds from the City of Fairbury, new trees are planted each year to replace these ash trees.

The second oldest park area in Fairbury was called the Commons. Alma Lewis James was a Fairbury historian who wrote the book *Stuffed Clubs and Antimacassars*. She also went through the Fairbury Blade newspaper archives and excerpted selected pieces of news. She also wrote short notations that her relatives or friends told her about. This collection of Blade excerpts and family stories were combined into a document called *Nicks from the Blade*.

In one of these stories, she recounted that in early Fairbury, there was a section of land south of Sunken Park and the railroad tracks. This section called the Commons, included Edith Bartlett Puffer's residence and the Taylor house. Alma recounted the story that this land had been an Indian battlefield, and the last stand was taken where the Stevens Apartments and Amish Church were in the 1970s. As a little girl, Aunt Emma Taylor used to go out on the Commons and pick up arrowheads, and they were just thick where they made that last stand. Unfortunately, there is no historical documentation that supports the story of a Native American battle on these grounds.

Genealogical research indicates that Emma D. Bartlett Taylor lived in Fairbury from 1861 until 1937. She would have been a little girl between 1866 and 1871. The Bartlett House still stands at the southwest corner of Fifth and Walnut Streets. The 1885 Sanborn Insurance map shows the area south of the railroad tracks as "The Grounds."

The 1911 Sanborn Map shows what is now Sunken Park and the land south of the tracks as "The Depot Grounds." At some point, businesses started to occupy the land south of

the railroad tracks. Today, no trace remains of the Commons park area except the old Sanborn maps. In a future article, the history of Veteran's Memorial Park, Sunken Park, Livingston Square, North Park, and Munz Park will be reviewed.

